

The Gentleman as a Hero? (Mis)representations of Heroic Masculinity in W. M. Thackeray's Vanity Fair

KATRI SIRKEL

Abstract. The aim of the article is to analyse the concept of gentlemanliness with regard to heroic masculinity in W.M. Thackeray's novel *Vanity Fair*. Set at the time of the Napoleonic Wars and written in the 1840s, the novel casts light on the controversial nature of the notion of gentleman. In the Victorian period, gentlemanliness came to be modelled on the principles of chivalry but there was nevertheless an implicit assumption originating from the Regency era that being a gentleman meant yielding to leisurely elegance rather than performing heroic deeds. Thackeray, whose formative years had passed in the Regency-tinted 1820s and early 1830s but who as a novelist gained maturity in the mid-nineteenth century, was acutely aware of the contradiction between the Regency and Victorian perceptions of gentlemanliness and the unease resulting therefrom. Thus, the paper argues that although the Regency standards of gentlemanliness were discarded as incompatible with Victorian heroic masculinity, they had a considerable influence on how heroism as a component of gentlemanliness was perceived in the Victorian era. The analysis of gentlemanliness focuses on the four principal male characters in the novel – Jos Sedley, Rawdon Crawley, George Osborne, and William Dobbin, of whom each represents aspects of gentlemanliness not entirely compatible with the Victorian heroic ideal. The article suggests that the characters take heroism as an asset for creating a heroic image rather than as a manifestation of heroic deeds, thus presenting vividly the contradiction within the concept of Victorian heroic masculinity.

Keywords: William Makepeace Thackeray; *Vanity Fair*; English gentleman; gentlemanliness; the Regency period; Victorian literature; Victorian masculinity; heroic ideal

Introduction

William Makepeace Thackeray's novel *Vanity Fair* can be regarded as period fiction making use of the past in order to comprehend contemporaneous anxieties. One of such concerns for the Victorians was the question of gentlemanliness. It had become a crucial issue which was discussed in a wealth of writings ranging from complex treatises to popular fiction. Thackeray's

writings were no exception and speculations of what being a gentleman is haunted him throughout his life and are manifested in his works and recorded in conversations (Taylor 2011: 18). The Victorian code inspired by the 19th century chivalric revival stipulated that a gentleman was expected to aspire towards heroism (Houghton 1985: 305–306), showing bravery, righteousness and generosity in all his deeds. However, the Regency standards that dominated the first decades of the 19th century laid a great emphasis on leisurely elegance and the promotion of one's image, urging men to follow the example of the heroes of the ballroom rather than those of battlefields and chivalric romances. The aim of the paper is to analyse the contrast between the Victorian heroic masculinity and the Regency idea of gentlemanliness with the focus on the four principal male characters in *Vanity Fair*. The article claims that despite being dismissed by the Victorians as incompatible with heroic masculinity, the image-centred approach to gentlemanliness of the Regency period was reluctant to subside and it left a strong imprint on the perception of heroism as an important aspect of the Victorian idea of gentlemanliness. For Thackeray, the Victorian idea of the moral and chivalrous gentleman was a controversial notion in which the two seemingly opposite frameworks of values merged. The historical setting in *Vanity Fair* provided the novelist with an appropriate context to examine the controversy of gentlemanliness with regard to heroism which was considered a *sine qua non* when the conduct of gentlemen, both soldiers and civilians, was under scrutiny at the time of war.

The concept of gentlemanliness in the Regency and the Victorian period

The term *masculinity* is a multifaceted notion since the patterns of masculinities that dominate different periods are always changing (Connell 2009: 185; Reeser 2013: 2–4) and therefore an exhaustive definition can hardly be provided. In early and mid-nineteenth-century Britain the standard of masculine behaviour was based on the notion of gentleman and the ideas of exemplary masculinity and gentlemanliness often coincided. Nonetheless, in the Regency era, gentleman was a contradictory notion open to multiple interpretations. While since the Middle Ages gentility had been associated with noble blood and ownership of land, the Regency period (1811–1820) saw these old facets gradually disappearing (Priestly 2002: 41). The traditional notion of gentlemanliness witnessed a shift in paradigm as it was no longer the aristocrats setting the tone but the *nouveau riche* and the new self-made men who often stole the scene in high society. The pleasure-loving nobility showed an unprecedented tolerance

in matters of rank, provided that the new celebrity socialites possessed either money or a certain *je ne sais quoi* (*ibid.*) which made their company desirable. The spirit of the age had changed, “*Noblesse oblige* had been guillotined”, and the old standards were on the demise (*ibid.*).

Thackeray was born in 1811, right at the beginning of the Regency. The period has come to be associated with an excessive and pleasure-seeking way of life, which was best demonstrated by the Prince Regent, the eldest son of George III, after whom the period was named, and his circle. It was the dawn of the modern era when the class barriers, although still solidly separating social layers, were ignored if considered expedient. The Prince of Wales himself set an example of running against the establishment by promoting and encouraging people of obscure origin. His preference for commoners over aristocrats was often unprecedented and scandalous. For instance, he ignored the rules of protocol when it pleased him and he once even changed the order of precedence to favour an actress over a Duchess (Murray 1999: 21). Royal acceptance of commoners served as the best social capital for men whose prospects in life could have been otherwise not very promising. George Brummell's career as a much-admired elitist socialite is a good example of how a virtual nobody could be promoted to the leader of the fashionable world thanks to royal favour. Being a natural born talent in matters of style and wit, Brummell was highly appreciated by the Regent, who recognized him as his personal fashion advisor and the best of friends. High society admired his scathing witticisms, impeccable taste and gentlemanly reserve, and as such Brummell was soon acknowledged as the uncrowned king of *haut monde* regardless of his humble origin (*e.g.* Kelly 2005). Brummell's rise had proved that a carefully constructed public image and skilful self-presentation could efficiently be used as an asset in one's aspirations towards gentlemanly status.

The emergence of Brummell-like celebrities served as a proof that the former conventions of rank had become more fluid and unfathomable. The prerogatives that had for long been reserved solely for gentlemen of blood were now publicly enjoyed by commoners. The elite, though still finicky about a man's origin, were ready to make concessions. Although the roaring Regency came to a close in 1820, the idea of open elite survived and the concept of the gentleman broadened as a result. The more restrained Victorian days put an extra emphasis on a gentleman's character, the paragon of which was supposed to be a perfect melange of high Christian morality and chivalric bravery. Obviously, such a new ideal was not only the privilege of the nobility, but it could also be pursued by men of a more modest background. A growing interest in the past and the unprecedented hero cult that emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars helped to lay the foundations of heroic

myth. For Victorians, a hero was to be “a man of the highest moral stature” (Houghton 1985: 316), demonstrate “no sign of panic or cowardice, be courteous and protective to women and children, be loyal to their comrades and meet death without flinching” (Girouard 1981: 7).

Thackeray, who with his upper-middle class roots was by no means “settled” in life as a gentleman, must have found the changing notion of gentlemanliness both intriguing and appealing, for the new ideal could be aspired to by everyone. However, the controversy that characterised the concept of the gentleman at the time cannot be better exemplified than by Thackeray’s own attitudes to the issue. Feeling a strong affiliation with the ruling circles, Thackeray had adopted in his youth a stance that class distinctions were inevitable and the privileges acquired by birth could not be annihilated by any shift in the paradigm of gentlemanliness (Ray 1955: 213–215). By the time he set his pen to paper to pursue a literary career, he had also had a taste of the compulsory formal and informal education of a gentleman. As a result, Thackeray formed an overall concept of what it takes to be one: to be a gentleman was to lead “a somewhat lazy but pleasant” life (Ray 1955: 128), filling one’s time with dress, snobbery, and dining (Castronovo 1987: 102). This approach to gentlemanliness testifies that Thackeray’s attitudes were those of the dashing Regency period rather than of the sedate Victorian mentality. His growing money worries that culminated in the 1830s after the Indian banking crisis (Ray 1955: 162) led to his becoming an indefatigable contributor to magazines and a novelist who was forced to follow a rigid discipline in order to support his family. It was a life Thackeray could not have been dreaming of as a young man with both professionally and economically promising prospects. Men like Thackeray in the 1820s and 1830s rarely thought about a true calling and a life of toil; to work meant to have a sinecure (Martineau in Houghton 1985: 245). Having lost his gentlemanly income and the privilege of leisure, Thackeray re-evaluated his former, rather inflexible tenets (Ray 1955: 166) and started to lay emphasis on more solid Victorian masculine virtues, for example integrity, modesty, and bravery, which could transcend class boundaries and can be developed without a generous income.

Heroism in the novel without heroes

Vanity Fair is Thackeray’s best-known novel and a landmark in his literary career, which, like many other works in his literary legacy, analyses the aspects of gentlemanly behaviour. The Regency period, in which the story is set, was much more alive for the mid-Victorians than many accounts of the mid-nineteenth

century allow us to believe. Thackeray was careful to pay attention to the minutest details in a bigger context, which resulted in a vivid portrait of the Regency “as a time of flux and uncertainty” (Peters 1991: xvi) both in matters of social order and the devastating continental conflict. Despite regarding the Regency as an era of dubitable moral values, the Victorians tended to associate the period with glorious British victories over the Corsican upstart who had set the reserved Brits astir. When Thackeray started writing *Vanity Fair* in 1845, the battle of Waterloo had been deeply ingrained in the collective memory of the British as a triumph over the subverting forces which had shaken the stability in Europe for a whole generation. The battle was seen as a landmark event in the overwhelming conflict against the mighty French adversary and the victory had turned the men engaged in the battle into heroes worthy of admiration and immense gratitude. The Duke of Wellington, for example, was worshipped as an unprecedented soldier hero as if he had single-handedly saved the nation from doom (Sinnema 2006: xiii passim). Wellington was showered with titles and honours and virtually “displaced Napoleon as the most famous man in the world” (Hilton 2008: 237). For many the Duke was the chief agent to boost national self-confidence and pride, and how else could he have achieved all this if he had not been a true English gentleman embodying reserve, valour, and discipline? The presentation of national heroes as reincarnations of chivalric virtues was appealing to Victorians, whose masculine ideal was inextricably linked with the code of chivalry.

The historical events, the perception of hero cult and the changing notion of gentlemanliness provided Thackeray with a wealth of subject matter to ponder about. Yet heroism for Thackeray was a moot concept and this stance is also reflected in the subtitle of *Vanity Fair – A Novel without a Hero*. Although the subtitle refers to a wider spectrum of unheroic characters, it also refers to the subversion of the much-promoted traditional warrior stereotype, which was making a comeback. By 1845, when the novel was published, heroism had almost become the byword of the day. For instance, in 1838, John Stuart Mill emphasised the importance of heroic literature in the education of younger generations, stating that

greatly is any book to be valued, which [...] does its part towards keeping alive the chivalrous spirit, which was the best part of the old romances; towards giving to the aspirations of the young and susceptible a noble direction, and keeping present to the mind an exalted standard of worth, by placing before it heroes and heroines worthy of the name (in Houghton 1985: 317).

As a keen observer of human nature, Thackeray had developed a sceptical stance to heroism and believed that heroic deeds involved a great deal of selfishness. According to Peters (1991: xvii), Thackeray set out to “explode the idea of the hero as a romantic ideal”, which he considered old-fashioned and “deeply flawed as a model for conduct”. Therefore, the male characters in the novel, Jos Sedley, Rawdon Crawley, George Osborne, and William Dobbin, all fall short of perfection (Mason 1982: 110). The extolled hero was replaced in *Vanity Fair* “by the less obviously attractive idea of the gentleman” (Peters 1991: xvii). His characters’ desire to be regarded as fearless warriors does not proceed from their selfless motives to protect the king and country, but from their ambition to be regarded as heroes enjoying the nation’s admiration and respect.

In the Regency, the chivalric ideals according to which a true gentleman was reputed for his valour and dignity had ceased to play a vital role in the gentlemanly demeanour and the ruling elite no longer claimed to be a paragon of virtue either. Thackeray, who had known a lazy and pleasant gentlemanlike life too well during his days at Cambridge (Ray 1955: 128), understood the conflict between the ideal and the real. Heroism was seldom the driving force behind the achievements on the battlefield and many of the British officers engaged in the conflict had bought the commission without having the necessary skills to live up to their posts. Old ideals often dissolved into money- and image-oriented *Vanity Fair*. For Thackeray, there is a great deal of egoism in men’s willingness to contribute to the glory of the nation in war. Their readiness to brave dangers in battle are inspired by fame that such courage brings rather than selfless patriotic verve compatible with the idealistic approach to heroic masculinity. For example, William Dobbin and George Osborne “talked about war and glory, and Boney and Wellington, and the last Gazette. In those famous days every Gazette had a victory in it, and the two gallant men longed to see their own names in the glorious list, and cursed their unlucky fate to belong to a regiment which had been away from the chances of honour” (Thackeray 1998: 44) while others were “reaping glory in the Peninsula” (*ibid.* 43).

Thackeray’s observations weaken the popular concept of chivalric heroism, which many of his contemporaries attempted to revive in their writings. Thackeray spares no irony in describing the stereotype that the Belgians have created of the brave men from Albion. The worldly-wise Belgians make the gallant redcoats seem like a band of don Quixotes who fight for a cause which is unfathomable to a small, but a more pragmatic nation. Thackeray refers to his own experience as a tourist to the sacred battlefield of Waterloo and recalls the tour guide, “a portly warlike-looking veteran” (*ibid.*) who, having been asked whether he was himself in the battle, retorts “Pas si bête” (*ibid.*).

George Osborne

Of the three officers whose characters Thackeray examines, George Osborne is probably the most delusive as a gentleman. He comes from a family that has recently arrived and he owes his carefree station in life to his father's successful commercial activity. He is a dashing young man of style whose elegant carelessness might catch the eye of the bored elite but whose lack of substance debases him as a gentleman. George is depicted as a young dandy officer in the vein of fashionable young men about town whose sole priority in life was entertainment. His father's wealth allows him to spend prodigiously, which is why he is often taken advantage of by more experienced gamblers like Rawdon Crawley. Captain Osborne is an audacious man who does not recoil at the idea of fighting a duel and does not bother himself with the possible consequences thereof. His daring ventures do not make him a hero in the Victorian sense, though. He is first of all a leisurely gentleman in the Regency style with a propensity to indulge in gambling, and as an officer he also sees the chance to fight as a game that gives him a surge of adrenalin. His heroism does not consist in a selfless devotion to the calling but in an adventure ridden with excitement and ambition to get promoted and recognized as a hero:

[George] ran swiftly to the alarm ground, where the regiment was mustered [...] his pulse was throbbing and his cheeks flushed: the great game of war was going to be played, and he one of the players. What a fierce excitement of doubt, hope, and pleasure! What tremendous hazards of loss or gain! What were all the games of chance he had ever played compared to this one? Into all contests requiring athletic skill and courage, the young man, from his boyhood upwards, had flung himself with all his might. The champion of his school and his regiment, the bravos of his companions had followed him everywhere; from the boys' cricket match to the garrison races, he had won a hundred of triumphs; and wherever he went, women and men had admired and envied him. (Thackeray 1998: 283).

The bravery that George demonstrates on the battlefield of Waterloo by cutting down "the French lancer who had speared the Ensign" (*ibid.* 305) must have been inspired by the above-mentioned motives even though the reader might for a moment get an impression of the transformation of his character. It is only later that George's true character is again revealed: on the eve of his departure he had planned an elopement with the main character of the novel, Becky Sharp. Thackeray passes his final verdict on George's behaviour in Becky's words, who rebukes George's wife Amelia for not seeing the true nature of her beloved:

“Couldn’t forget *him*! [...] the selfish humbug, that low-bred cockney dandy, that padded booby, who had neither wit, nor manners, nor heart” (*ibid.* 664).

George’s braggadocio and rashness are mistaken for heroism by Amelia, whose blindfolded adulation for George can be seen as a reference to the admirers of Scott’s novels, the emphatic hero worship of which made many a young girl “thrill to the thought of gallant knights, loyal chieftains and faithful lovers” (Girouard 1981: 30) without having the slightest conception of the yawning gap between life and fiction. Her naivety highlights the flaws in George’s behaviour and his mere charm does not compensate for the drawbacks in his conduct. He can be identified as a true gentleman at first sight because of his gallantry and education, but he by no means meets the Victorian ideal. George Osborne is a hero that only exists in Amelia’s imagination and the idealistic picture she has conjured up bears little resemblance to reality.

Rawdon Crawley

George Osborne and Rawdon Crawley have several traits in common as young men about town. Nonetheless, Rawdon, unlike George, is a gentleman of the blood who, though not as well off as his parvenu counterpart, could enjoy the privilege of being identified as a gentleman without having to prove his status with money. As it was characteristic of many aristocratic young men at the time, Rawdon led a life of dissipation. Thackeray portrays him as a dandy indulging in the fashionable vices of the day in the manner of the Regent and his entourage. Being a favourite with his rich aunt Miss Crawley, he expected to inherit a considerable fortune upon his aunt’s demise, a moment he was anxiously waiting for since a man engaged in costly pastimes is always in want of the means, especially before the beginning of the London season (Thackeray 1998: 120). Captain Crawley is considered to be an extraordinarily charming man with curling mustachios and a most graceful address. His fatal marriage to Becky disinherits him, but having already learnt in his youth how to live on nothing a year, his insolvency does not prevent him or his wife from enjoying an exorbitant lifestyle.

Rawdon Crawley is a gentleman modelled in the Regency style. He is not a man of integrity and makes a perfect team with his worldly-wise wife. Yet Rawdon is the only man of the four principal male characters in the novel who undergoes a major change. The transformation of his character is caused by his love for his wife and son and the imminent threat of getting killed in action. It is on the eve of Waterloo that he emerges as a selfless man, as a far cry from the once notorious dandy:

Faithful to his plan of economy, the Captain dressed himself in his oldest and shabbiest uniform and epaulets, leaving the newest behind under his wife's (or it might be his widow's) guardianship. And this famous dandy of Windsor and Hyde Park went off on his campaign with a kit as modest as that of a sergeant, and with something like a prayer on his lips for the woman he was leaving. (Thackeray 1998: 279)

The emergence of Rawdon as a loyal and caring husband lends him some credibility as a sympathetic, though not entirely a heroic character in Victorian terms.

Jos Sedley

Wellington's heroism was also transferred to his brothers in arms whose contribution was equally admired. However, the victorious duke presented a stark contrast with another leader of the nation, the Prince Regent, whose reputation as a carpet general did him no honour in the eyes his subjects. The Regent's love for pomp and parade made him an antithesis of the battle-toughened soldiers¹. The Prince was often mocked for his spectacular appearance in the public and ridiculed for his preference for fashion over politics at the time of war. Such criticism reached its apex in 1812, when the authorities were forced to take action against some publications which libelled the Royal Highness (Sales 1996: 64–65). However, such nonchalant denial of the severity of the situation was far more widespread and the Prince Regent could not have been the only scapegoat among those destined to defend the nation both at home and abroad.

An obvious parallel can be drawn between the Regent and Jos Sedley. Although he is no military man, Jos Sedley likes to ingratiate himself with high ranking officers believing that some of their experience and fame will rub off on him. He is convinced that socializing with the military makes it legitimate for him to style himself as one of them. With decisive battles looming on the horizon and the enticing prospect of being associated with Wellington's men induces him to take further steps to be recognized as a military man:

¹ However, to do the Regent some credit, he is known to have been desperate in the 1790s to join his brothers in the army and earn his epaulettes as was his due, but he was never granted a permission by his father, George III, who thought it too great a risk for the crown and country to put all his sons under arms (David 1999: 216–217).

As soon as he agreed to escort his sister abroad, it was remarked that he ceased shaving his upper lip. At Chatham he followed the parades and drills with great assiduity. He listened with the utmost attention to the conversation of his brother officers (as he called them in after days sometimes), and learned as many military names as he could [...] and on the day finally when they embarked on board the *Lovely Rose*, which was to carry them to their destination, he made his appearance in a braided frock-coat and duck trousers, with a foraging cap ornamented with a smart gold band. Having his carriage with him, and informing everybody on board confidentially that he was going to join the Duke of Wellington's army, folks mistook him for a great personage, a commissary-general, or a government courier at the very least. (Thackeray 1998: 254)

Agitated by the allegedly truthful accounts of Napoleon marching on Brussels, Jos, forgetting about his carefully constructed military image, is among the first to take flight. As he heard extracts of this alarming news, "Jos's face grew paler and paler. Alarm began to take entire possession of the stout civilian. All the champagne he drank brought no courage to him" (Thackeray 1998: 295). When he finally plucks up his courage and announces his plan to escape to Amelia and Mrs O'Dowd, he is only met with scorn and contempt. The daring Irishwoman also advises him to shave off the moustache for fear of being taken for a military man (*ibid.* 296).

Like Jos Sedley in the novel, the Prince of Wales was also known for his obsession with appearance and military uniforms in particular (Gronow in Hibbert 2002: 671). The Regent was fascinated with the soldier prince Frederick the Great of Prussia and having carefully studied the style and trends of the continental uniforms at the time, he designed his own version to be worn on parades (Kelly 2005: 121–122). To compensate for the Prince's lack of opportunity to fight on the continent with his brothers, king George III made his eldest son the commander of the 10th Regiment of Light Dragoons, which was honoured with the title "The Prince of Wales's Own" and which was never to serve in battle or abroad (*ibid.* 122). The Regiment was thus "reserved for occasions when looking good was important" and attracted men who were willing to pursue a military career without having to fight and who loved uniforms and leisure as much as the Prince himself (*ibid.*). The theatricality of their duties in fashionable uniforms introduced dandyism to military life, reinforcing the idea that the appearance of heroism was just as important as being heroic.

As for Jos Sedley's appearance, the parallels between Jos and the Regent are also evident. Jos is described as "a very stout, puffy man, in buckskins and Hessian boots, with several immense neckcloths, that rose almost to his nose,

with a red-striped waistcoat and an apple-green coat with steel buttons almost as large as crown pieces (it was the morning costume of a dandy or blood of those days)" (Thackeray 1998: 15–16). Jos Sedley let anyone know "that he and Brummell were the leading bucks of the day" (*ibid.* 19), which was to indicate also his own proximity to the Regent. According to Captain Gronow's account, the Prince Regent was very sensitive even to the slightest flippancies in people's outfit and made respective remarks to draw the trespasser's attention to the faux pas (in Hibbert 2002: 671). Similarly, Jos Sedley is provocatively fastidious about the clothing of the people around him and he is not ashamed to ignore them or treat them haughtily when they do not meet his sartorial standards. For example, he is very friendly with Captain Dobbin, who "with shells on his frock-coat, and a crimson sash and sabre, presented a military appearance, which made Jos quite proud to be able to claim such an acquaintance, and the stout civilian hailed him with a cordiality very different from the reception which Jos vouchsafed to his friend in Brighton and Bond Street" (Thackeray 1998: 248).

Jos represents effeminate masculinity, which the Victorians strongly disapproved of and which was regarded as a threat to the manly ideal. However, Thackeray admits that comparing such men with the vain weaker sex would be quite inappropriate, for

girls have only to turn the tables, and say of one of their own sex, "She is as vain as a man," and they will have perfect reason. The bearded creatures are quite as eager for praise, quite as finikin[g] over their toilettes, quite as proud of their personal advantages, quite as conscious of their powers of fascination, as any coquette in the world. (Thackeray 1998: 20)

Old Mr Sedley had developed a contempt for his son, for he was "vain, selfish, lazy, and effeminate" (*ibid.* 45). Mr. Sedley concedes that his son is "a great deal vainer" than his mother has ever been in her life, "and that's saying a good deal" (*ibid.* 26). The father does not tolerate his son being a man of fashion who tells "pompous braggadocio stories" only to assure himself of his self-importance (*ibid.*). Joseph's fixation with his looks does not abandon him even at the tensest of moments when he has to take a quick flight from the allegedly approaching French troops:

Such is the force of habit, that even in the midst of his terror he began mechanically to twiddle with his hair, and arrange the cock of his hat. Then he looked amazed at the pale face in the glass before him, and especially at his mustachios, which had attained a rich growth in the course of near seven weeks, since they had come into the world. They will mistake me for a military man, thought he,

remembering Isidor's warning as to the massacre with which all the defeated British army was threatened. (Thackeray 1998: 298–299).

Even though Thackeray turned him into a caricature in the style of the Regent, Jos Sedley still emerges as a gentleman whose reputation does not suffer as a result of his ludicrous and unheroic behaviour.

William Dobbin

The understanding that a man of lower origin can aspire to a gentlemanly status thanks to their deeds is best exemplified by Major Dobbin, who, coming from a grocer's family, has nevertheless been able to rise in society. Becky, who is an acute observer of human nature and knows "the genuine article" when she sees it (Mason 1982: 113), calls him "one of the best gentlemen" (Thackeray 1998: 664), for there are hardly any other male characters in *Vanity Fair* who could compete with him in tact, delicacy, bravery, and earnestness. Dobbin's starting point in life had been quite difficult and he had been more often than not ridiculed by his fellow students at Dr. Swishtail's famous school because of his father's trade. The rumours had it that he had only been accepted by Dr. Swishtail on the grounds of "mutual principles", *i.e.* the expenses of his studies were paid in goods, not money (*ibid.* 34). As a result, he stood "almost at the bottom of the school – in his scraggy corduroys and jacket" (*ibid.*), making him a laughing stock in the eyes of the boys like George Osborne, who himself was a son of a merchant but whose father's good luck in business had placed him on a higher pedestal with the right to be called a gentleman. Dobbin was able to win Master George's sympathy and respect only by virtue of his daring behaviour in protecting the boy from a bully. What he achieved in his life, he owed to his own merits. His station in life would never have been enough to be accepted by his betters, for "[people] rightly considered that the selling of goods by retail is a shameful and infamous practice, meriting the contempt and scorn of all real gentlemen" (*ibid.* 35).

Though completely ungentlemanly according to the standards of Thackeray's youth, Dobbin emerges as a paragon of the new ideal of the selfless hero. He is the one who settles the problems which his friend Osborne frequently incurs, keeping discreetly a low profile and without revealing his role as the real benefactor. His gallantry and valour at Waterloo are duly recounted in the novel by a wounded ensign, an approach probably applied by Thackeray in order to emphasise the Captain's reserve and modesty when it came to his heroic deeds, for Dobbin would have never yielded to such vanity as to talk about his achievements himself. The readers learn from the youngster that

it was Captain Dobbin who, at the end of the day, though wounded himself, took up the lad in his arms and carried him to the surgeon, and thence to the cart which was to bring him back to Brussels. And it was he who promised the driver two Louis if he would make his way to Mr. Sedley's hotel in the city, and tell Mrs. Captain Osborne that the action was over, and that her husband was unhurt and well. (Thackeray 1998: 305)

His great modesty is supposed to be compatible with the ruling masculine ideal; however, the account of his behaviour is not presented without a touch of irony. His utter selflessness occasionally turns him into a quixotic character whose existence is founded on the principles which often do not work in reality. Although he is the closest to the new gentlemanly ideal, Thackeray (1998: 645) conceded that "this story has been written to very little purpose if the reader has not perceived that the major was a spooney". Dobbin has no style, is embarrassingly clumsy and lacks social graces, which is why he, unlike the charming George Osborne, is not regarded as a proper gentleman in the first encounter. Yet the author also has to admit that "his thoughts were just, his brains were fairly good, his life was honest and pure, and his heart warm and humble" (*ibid.* 603). Dobbin's spotless reputation turns him into a rather unattractive and unexciting character whose benevolence and selflessness tend to make a fool of him rather than a hero in Victorian terms.

Conclusion

Vanity Fair, though set in the first decades of the nineteenth century, highlights the Victorian concern about gentlemanliness with regard to the subversive influence of the Regency and offers a broader perspective on the agitating controversy that cast a shadow on the heroic masculine ideal. The Victorian age was a time which sought to re-establish heroic conduct as the epitome of masculinity. In doing so, however, the flaws of the unattainable ideal were also inadvertently underlined. In *Vanity Fair*, the image of the brave warrior gentleman is contorted insofar as none of the major male characters displays the necessary qualities. The "knightly combatant" either merges into a selfish man who disregards the ethos of fighting for a noble cause, or demonstrates his well-groomed officer look in an attempt to create a heroic image which was considered just as important as being heroic. Being equally critical of the Victorian cult of heroic masculinity as well as the reckless self-centeredness produced by the Regency standards, Thackeray has aptly foregrounded the conflict within the concept of gentlemanliness with regard to heroism and has

addressed the contentious issue that the Victorian gentlemanly ideal was not the opposite of that of the Regency but in many ways the bearer of its legacy.

Katri Sirkel

katri.sirkel@ut.ee

KVÜÕA Keelekeskus

Riia 12

51013 Tartu

EESTI / ESTONIA

References

- Castronovo, D. 1987. *The English Gentleman. Images and Ideals in Literature and Society*. New York: Ungar.
- Connell, R.W. 2009. *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- David, S. 1999. *Prince of Pleasure. The Prince of Wales and the Making of the Regency*. London: Abacus.
- Girouard, M. 1981. *The Return to Camelot. Chivalry and the English Gentleman*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Hibbert, C. 2002. *George IV*. London: Penguin Books.
- Hilton, B. 2008. *A Mad, Bad, & Dangerous People? England 1783–1846*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Houghton, W. E. 1985. *The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830–1870*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Kelly, I. 2005. *Beau Brummell: The Ultimate Dandy*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Mason, P. 1982. *The English Gentleman. The Rise and Fall of an Ideal*. New York: William Morrow and Company.
- Murray, V. 1999. *High Society in the Regency Period 1788–1830*. London: Penguin Books.
- Peters, C. 1991. Introduction. – W. M. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*. London: Everyman's Library, ix–xxvi.
- Priestley, J. B. *The Prince of Pleasure & His Regency 1811–20*. London: Penguin Books.
- Ray, G. N. 1955. *Thackeray: The Uses of Adversity 1811–1846*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.
- Reeser, T.W. 2013. *Masculinities in Theory. An Introduction*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Sales, R. 1996. *Jane Austen and Representations of Regency England*. London: Routledge.
- Sinnema, P. W. 2006. *The Wake of Wellington. Englishness in 1852*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Taylor, D. J. 2011. *Thackeray*. London: Vintage Books.
- Thackeray, W. M. 1998. *Vanity Fair*. Ware: Wordsworth.